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# Student Experiences: A Critical Reflection of the M.Sc. in Educational Leadership Blended-Learning Program

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Proliferation of digital technologies and massification of education gave a breath of fresh air to conventional education and triggered a wave of innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Who would imagine a decade ago that it is now possible to ‘attend’ classes without leaving your apartment or to interact with experts from across the world without leaving your desk? Yet, as distance learning with massive open online courses and learning platforms such as *EdX* and *Coursera* started evolving, this has become a widespread phenomenon that made education more accessible. Given the competitive labor market, we are constantly striving to develop both personally and professionally, and blended learning programs enable us to do so. There is likely no “one-fits-all” approach to learning, and, certainly, the blended-learning mode bears both benefits and drawbacks. I want to share some thoughts about NUGSE’s blended-learning program as well as a few hints of how to effectively avoid or surmount possible challenges. Students enrolled or considering enrolling in graduate studies, faculty who work with students in these various modes, and administrators who support these programs may all benefit from understanding the student experience a bit better.

## The Beginning of Blended-Learning

While desperately browsing the Internet for a graduate program that would meet my goals of working in higher education, I learned about the Master of Science (MSc) at NUGSE. After much thought, I opted for the blended-learning program. My choice was neither accidental nor spontaneous, as I longed for the program that would provide me with quality education in the area I am interested in and would allow me to combine work and studies. One of the key reasons why a work-study blend is attractive is that it enables you to directly transfer and apply the knowledge acquired in the program to your immediate work environment. In the time of rapid economic and social changes this type of program is a great opportunity for education specialists to grow as professionals without being torn from their workplace.

My surface understanding of blended-learning led to a misconception about the program, perhaps because of my experience in the traditional education system. Having looked through the website and brochures inside out, and attended the shadowing event organized by NUGSE, it seemed that I was ready to start. However, beginning of the first semester showed me I did not fully understand how the program would operate. What I imagined was that language courses will be the only classes conducted online, and the only online assignments would be for these courses. In reality, some of the assignments and final papers for the courses taken during intensive sessions needed to be completed after these sessions were finished. This means that not only will you have to keep up with Academic English and Kazakh language courses that are fully online-based, but also you will need to work on group projects and final papers for other courses distantly.

## Benefits of Blended-Learning

Despite the slightly distorted outset, drafting my thesis and finding myself at the last lap of the program, I clearly see how much I have benefited from the program and developed as a person, as a novice researcher, and as a passionate higher education explorer. As a combination of the traditional classroom and e-learning, the MSc program offers the best of these two. Whilst studying in such a mode might expose students to less communication with professors and peers compared to face-to-face courses, I would argue that Moodle discussion forums, e-mails, social networks, and WhatsApp messenger have the potential to fill in this gap. Being in another city or even another part of the world, you can receive the same

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feedback on an assignment from a professor/instructor, or clarify any confusion electronically. With blended-learning you have an opportunity to participate in lively insightful discussions and be involved in a group work both online and during intensive sessions on campus. Similarly to those studying at the face-to-face program, MSc students as NU community members have full access to the library resources and services, including a range of online databases (e.g. ERIC, SAGE, Scopus, Springer) that you can employ whenever and wherever you need. What is particularly valuable in this program is that you learn to be self-organized and develop as an independent learner. Much of the time you will need to browse the materials yourself, read more than what is assigned, and properly manage your time. Interestingly, due to the limited face-to-face communication and on-campus hours, you start to appreciate the intensive sessions spent at GSE more.

### Caution: Challenges!

As I think of the hardest times of studying at this blended-learning program, I recall issues related to the choice of thesis topic, teamwork, and work-family balance. Although the program lasts two years, it requires you

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to consider the focus of your thesis from the beginning; thus, many of our topics rested on our personal experience (e.g. academic freedom, academic mobility, student loans). Nonetheless, as we progressed from one course to another, we learned more about our fields and the associated issues. Then, when half of the academic year had already passed, some suddenly wanted to switch their focus, which was acceptable but made it harder for them to explore the topic deeply because many of the final assignments throughout the program were connected to the initially chosen area. Teamwork can also be difficult. It is a real challenge to produce a collectively written quality paper with deep analysis and synthesis when you are in different cities, just returned from intensive sessions on campus, burdened with work, and, consequently, not able to properly

communicate. Such group work requires a strong sense of responsibility, commitment, and involvement. Importantly, while some of those studying at this program might experience the same issues, these may, admittedly, vary depending on personal circumstances. For instance, those students who besides work and studies have to take care of their children and household are experiencing more difficulties, facing misunderstandings in families and at work, making it crucial that your family accepts and supports your choice.

### Useful Tips

Although there are certain difficulties of studying via blended-learning, these are mitigated by guidance and support of the faculty and can be overcome by careful planning on the student's part. Here are a few things that I wish someone had advised me on a year ago, and that I hope you will find helpful:

- Make sure you have at least a general idea of what your research interests are. Although prospective applicants are not obliged to have work experience or directly related professional background in the area they are applying for, it would be an advantage for you if you have a few themes in mind.
- Make sure you know the schedule of the program and plan your time accordingly to meet your work, family, and other commitments.
- Be sure that the schedule of the program, especially the intensive sessions, do not contradict your arrangements at work, so you would feel less pressured and distracted by your colleagues and supervisor.
- If you are struggling with meeting a deadline, do not be afraid to contact a faculty member and explain your situation, but do it early. From my experience, GSE faculty members try to find an individual approach to every student.
- Finally, be open to participate in any events held at the university while being on campus and enjoy this precious time of being a student!

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